

Virtual reality: 7 steps to delivering events online

A guide to creating successful online events programmes for your organization



The evolution of 'virtual events'

Wherever you are in the world, it is possible to presume that your organization has been affected by restrictions caused by the response to COVID-19. Of the myriad ways this may be affecting you, limits on meeting in-person can be one of the hardest challenges to overcome, as **arguably there is no substitute for real-life engagement**.

However, **many organizations have been quick to transform their cancelled in-person events into virtual alternatives**. Virtual events are providing replacement benefits to busy events managers, such as shorter to-do checklists and unlimited guest lists, and it seems unlikely even with the end of the pandemic in sight that virtual events will disappear from the norm.

Being able to **provide value and insight for your graduates without meeting in person** stands to save organizations a considerable amount of costs and time, so getting your virtual events programme right is key to long-term sustainable success.

This guide will take you through the steps to hosting successful virtual events, with tips on how to encourage engagement and ultimately deliver support.



Contents of this guide

- [Pros and cons of virtual events](#)
- [3 things to consider before you plan your virtual event](#)
- [7 steps to deliver your events programme online](#)
- [25 creative ideas for virtual events](#)
- [About ToucanTech](#)



Choosing a virtual host

What makes a great virtual host?

- Some technical ability, to ensure that moving between slides is a smooth process, and you can use interactive technology such as live polls and Q&A functions
- The ability to make an event feel lively and exciting even when talking to a blank screen!
- Content is even more important to keep people hooked in a virtual event, so choose speakers with great stories and practical tips that will leave your audience inspired and connected
- Ensure there is a point of relevance between your speaker and audience; whether they are a fellow graduate, or an industry specialist that can provide helpful advice



Weighing up virtual events: pros & cons

When planning virtual events, you will often run into different hurdles to in-person events. Here are some key advantages and disadvantages to consider before getting started...

Advantages:

Accessibility

You can have guest speakers from around the world, without worrying about travel, accommodation or clashing schedules!

Your alumni can dial in from home, and can join and leave longer events as it suits. They are also more likely to be flexible on different time zones when connecting online as opposed to in-person.



Toucan Tip: Why not try expanding the audience for a would-be local event, into a national or even international one?

Capacity

Physical events present a very real maximum capacity, which must be considered when booking venues, allocating tickets and managing contingency plans. Virtual events don't have the same limitations, nor do they require a balancing act between ticket sales, overheads and a minimum viable number of attendees.

Cost

Even though there may be additional costs for the provision of an online events platform, virtual events are much more affordable for many organizations, which is why many hope that the trend towards digital and hybrid events is here to stay. In addition, the reduction in cost is passed on to attendees, who are attracted by lower ticket prices and transportation costs.

Engagement

As virtual meetings have dominated the last year, from family quizzes to work calls, many more people are now far more comfortable connecting online than ever before. As a result, virtual events provide a great opportunity to build engagement in your community, particularly while there are few opportunities on the horizon for in-person events.

Human resource

Another cost-saving area lies in the reduced requirement to staff physical events, saving employees or staffing agencies time from set-up to pack-down.



Weighing up virtual events - the pros and cons

Disadvantages:

Differing levels of tech confidence

While so many people of all ages have adapted to audio visual technology playing a bigger role in their lives, some still may not feel completely confident with their tech capabilities. It is possible that engagement with older members of your network may struggle to get to grips online events, and it may be wise to consider alternative communication methods to maintain connections with older or more vulnerable segments of your audience.



Toucan Tip: Having tech support on-hand is important, particularly when inviting an audience with varied age-ranges or abilities. Depending on the format and size of the event, you may need a bigger tech support team to ensure your event runs smoothly.

Limitations on certain formats

Certain event formats are more suited to a virtual alternative than others; when it comes to more interactive formats such as workshops or networking opportunities, it's important to plan carefully to keep your attendees engaged. Using online 'breakout rooms' for discussions can work well, and it's beneficial to include a 'host' in each of the rooms to structure the questions and give everyone a chance to contribute.



Toucan Tip: Allocate an employee to each breakout room beforehand, and give them a clear brief on how to introduce the topic, collect ideas and bring everyone back into the main session.

Encouraging alumni to sign up in person

While you can't encourage graduates to sign up to your alumni community in person at your next online event, it might not be as difficult as you anticipate to encourage registrations during and after your event. Sending tailored comms post-event by using engagement filters can attract sign ups, while having a quick registration form to sign up to your community site can encourage new alumni to join during a break.



Toucan Tip: Make the most of every channel to engage, by including an opt-in for comms and capturing contact details in the event sign up process



3 questions to consider before you dive into the details

Hosting events can be time-consuming, so it's important to connect the outcome you need with the effort you're putting in

Set yourself up for success by asking these key questions



1. What is the purpose of your event?

Are you trying to engage a specific segment of your alumni community? Is this event to drive awareness of the value of staying in touch with your institution? Finding the purpose of your event is key to setting yourself up for success, and will ensure that you can report back to your stakeholders clearly and with great results. Make sure that you can share a great reason to attend with your invitees - it might be to drive awareness of the kind of help and advice that is offered by your organization, or to network with other graduates.



2. What is the demographic of your event?

Understanding your audience and segmenting your event can be easier with digital events, and doing this carefully will ensure that your event hits the mark for those that attend. Considering details such as whether the event is tailored for engaged or lost alumni, which types of stakeholders you will invite, and whether you will be mixing different demographics.



3. What are the needs of your attendees?

Virtual events do provide a challenge, not just for older attendees, but for anyone that may have low tech confidence. Often, step-by-step guides are needed to be sent out prior to the event, and live tech support is a must for any large or complex event. In addition, when hosting you're hosting a virtual event: safety is key. It's important to check details such as that your emails aren't getting caught in spam filters, and the meeting or event is secure.



Step 1: Deciding on your purpose and target audience for your event

What are you aiming to achieve with the event, and with who?



Lead generation -

Ways to use virtual events to secure new leads:

- When asking people to sign up, if you're running a content-based event (such as a webinar or roundtable), encourage them to sign up even if they can't make the event, and send a recording of the event to them afterwards.
- Write a round-up of the event for your community site, so that people who did not join can get a sense of what your events are like, and gain insights such as updates on development projects. Ask your alumni to register or sign in to your private community site to read the full roundup.

Nurture -

Ways to use virtual events to nurture potential members:



- Events are a brilliant way to warm up graduates to getting back in touch with your organization; it gives a first hand experience of the benefits they can expect such as networking and industry advice. If an alum attends your event and is regularly engaging with other digital content such as emails or newsletters, it could be a good opportunity to prompt them to sign up.
- Ensure that your attendee journey offers plenty of opportunities to take the next step, for example, include an option to opt in to future comms at registration, signpost benefits of joining during the event, and include a call to action to sign up in your post-event comms.

Stewardship -

Ways to deliver value for your members:



- Share inspiring stories of how alumni have received support through your organization during COVID.
- Share opportunities to hear from experts, and provide timely guidance and success stories.
- Set up networking events to give alumni a chance to connect with peers.



Step 2: Choosing the right format

Virtual events don't have to stick to the same formula as your previous events: now is a good time to experiment and try a new format to engage your audience

Webinars

Webinars are speaker to audience events that can be run with one host or as a panel of speakers.

Hybrid events

A mixture of in-person and virtual events. For example, a webinar with a live audience that is also streamed online.

Virtual conferences

Multi-day or multi-session events that can be effective for going into detail on content, or covering a wide range of topics.

Regional meetings

Though in-person events might not be able to go ahead, members may still find it useful to speak to those within their region as they are likely to have the same experiences of COVID restrictions etc.

Roundtables

A virtual roundtable is an online session designed to share knowledge, insights and experiences among members on a specific topic.

Networking (speed dating)

Keep networking short and sweet online; one way to make the most of virtual networking is to match those looking to discuss similar topics, or to give each person a set of questions and a time limit to encourage everyone to get involved!

Workshops

Workshops, similar to roundtables, give members the chance to focus on a specific topic, but often include smaller breakout rooms with tasks to complete.

General/recurring updates

Organization updates that can be recorded and uploaded to your community website, or portal, and members can tune in live and ask questions.

Fun social events

From wine tasting to floristry classes, social events can be a great way to help members network and get involved.

Competitions

Running virtual competitions such as a bake-off, talent contest or poetry slam can be done fairly easily online, and can drive lots of interest!



Toucan Tip:

Match your format to your purpose - if you want to have one-to-one conversations with influential graduates, consider networking or smaller, intimate social events. If you're looking to attract alumni who aren't currently engaged or drive awareness of your network, running larger events will likely bring in a greater number of leads.



Step 3: Funding your event

Consider how your event will be funded and what costs you will incur hosting online - from speaker fees to event platform costs.

While virtual events tend to be significantly cheaper than in-person alternatives, there are still costs involved, so in order to make your efforts worthwhile and aiming for positive ROI, setting your budget and income goals should be done early on.

Ticket prices are often valued differently compared to in-person events; what you're offering in virtual events is often more intangible than a traditional dinner-and-drinks ticket.

Depending on how your organization is run, you may make events free to your graduates, as a way of providing value for those in your alumni community, and charge for external guests or non-members.

You can also consider staggering the cost of tickets, and encouraging registrations through early bird deals or multi-ticket discounts.

Getting creative with corporate sponsorship

Put simply, sponsors want to connect with people in your network, and are willing to pay a price to do so. The positive engagement opportunities at events make them a popular piece of activity to 'sponsor', and this introduces another revenue stream for the organization.

If you have not had sponsors for one of your events before, going virtual is a great opportunity to test out what works. There are still so many ways to provide exposure for sponsors through online events, including -

- Branding on event promotional comms and materials
- Offering the chance for the sponsor to introduce themselves
- Branding on the presentation slides
- Providing a tailored offer in follow-up comms
- Capturing opt-ins to be contacted by the sponsor in future



Here's a few suggestions for who to invite to sponsor your event

- Member-owned businesses
- Locally-owned businesses
- Affiliated corporates or potential new partners
- Suppliers or vendors



Step 4: Promoting your online events

How to publicise virtual events using traditional methods

Promoting online events is a new challenge; no longer can invitees be won over with the promise of dinner and drinks! Instead, organizations must to focus on the content and delivery of their events, and which channels they use to promote, to encourage members to register - and then to turn up!



Toucan Tip

Start promoting your event approximately 6 weeks before the event - online events typically have a shorter promotion cycle.

Encouraging sign ups to limitless events

With little risk of online events 'selling out' (format dependent), graduates can be slower to sign up. To combat this, use teaser content when promoting and direct invitees to the website to learn more, where it's easier to persuade them to sign up in a few moments. Additionally, offers of exclusivity such as cheaper tickets, or unlocking exclusive content, can drive registrations. Finally, you can use 'last chance' communications to encourage final sign ups in the last few days (or day of!) your event.

How to sell virtual networking

Virtual networking can be difficult, even though many people are feeling more confident after a year of online socialising! To make virtual networking work, people need to have conversations in small groups or one-on-one, so using breakout rooms can work well. In addition, pairing networking sessions with industries is a good way to assure people that they will be making valuable connections.

Getting registrants to turn up!

Now they've registered, how can you encourage people to turn up? How many of us have signed up to a webinar in the last year with all the right intentions, but didn't quite make it? Virtual events are often cheaper than in-person events, not least from the financial gain of not having to pay for accommodation or travel. This can present a risk that people will sign up to your events and not turn up. To encourage registrants to show up, consider sending out an email to ask for questions for the speaker, so attendees will join to hear their question answered live.



Step 5: Getting it right on the day

How to host an engaging online session in-house

Audience participation isn't out of the question for virtual events; in fact, audience participation is more accessible and may feel far more comfortable to people who would prefer to type a question than stand up in a conference theatre.

How can you encourage audience participation?

- Send an email before the event which prompts registrants to send in a question to the speaker
- Use chat facilities available on most virtual event platforms to encourage open dialogue throughout
- Use breakout rooms to discuss content in smaller groups
- Encourage the use of social media hashtags throughout larger events, such as a conference, to generate awareness

Choose a platform and schedule to match the format

As well as a schedule, think about what kinds of software your audience will need to use to attend your event. ToucanTech can facilitate events management with online giving capabilities, for a smooth process - you can capture contact details and create a record for each attendee, to target with future comms!

Communicating a schedule for your audience is important: is the event running over multiple days, and will supporters participate on their own schedule (e.g. pre-recorded sessions) or join in live for a workshop?



Testing, testing...

Ensure that at least a week prior, you conduct platform training for speakers. Make sure to go through switching between speakers, screen sharing, and checking audio and webcam quality!

Pulling off a successful speaker session

1. Make sure to have clear, structured slides if you're using them. Keeping information to a minimum on the slides will help to focus the audience on your speaker's words instead!
2. Create an active virtual environment: encourage your audience to ask questions and either answer as you go through, or leave time for a Q&A at the end - remember to come up with a few seed questions.
3. Have someone on-hand to monitor the chat box and help with anyone having technical issues.
4. Ensure you are well-lit, preferably with a neutral or clear background.



Step 6: Executing your follow up

Considering the attendee experience

It's important to consider how your virtual event will sit alongside the rest of your events programme, and how these moments compliment the other engagement opportunities you offer.

Planning your follow-up and intended 'next steps' for your attendees should come early on in the planning process, to ensure your core messaging is followed throughout, and makes clear sense to your attendees.

What is the next step you want attendees to take?

Is it to sign up to your alumni community, or to engage in a different way? Defining a next step, and using this as the thread throughout your event will lead to a greater number of your attendees taking a subsequent action.

Consider what your attendee's goals are by registering for your event. Are they looking to learn more about the opportunities that come from being part of your alumni network, you do, searching for industry best practice, or trying to connect with other graduates?

Matching up your event to their own personal journey is a great way to create meaningful engagement that will encourage further participation.

Example attendee journey



Step 7: Analysing your data post-event

Using metrics to find out more about what worked in your events, and draw insights you can use for improving next time

The more data you can gather about your event, from your comms to speaker feedback, the greater your opportunity to tailor your event next time.

Metric	Calculating your metric	How you can use this insight to improve your events?
Email open rate - pre-event	$\frac{\text{How many people opened}}{\text{How many people you sent your email to}} \times 100$	If your open rates are low, try using a different subject line. For networking events, making it explicit that it's an invitation can work well, e.g. 'Sign up to our class of 2020 welcome event'.
Registration rate	$\frac{\text{How many people registered}}{\text{how many people were invited}} \times 100$	You may be able to improve your registration rate by adding more information to your event listing, or tailoring your invitations to different segments.
Attendee rate	$\frac{\text{How many people attended}}{\text{how many people registered}} \times 100$	If you have a particularly high drop off rate for attendees, it might be worth considering testing running your events at different times, and sending a reminder on the day of your event.
Email click through rate - post event	$\frac{\text{How many people clicked}}{\text{how many people opened your post-event email}} \times 100$	Ensure you're making it easy for your alumni to take the next step in their journey, whether that's clicking through to your community site or signing up to another event. Use buttons in your emails and a strong call to action to incentivise clicks.



25 unusual ideas for your next virtual event

Get creative - this is the time to try out new ideas and capture people's attention.

Gather community support

1. Sponsored walkathon/marathon
2. Art auction
3. Silent auction
4. Matched giving
5. Climb everest from home

Create social events for your members

6. Virtual concert
7. Bingo night
8. Online cookery masterclass
9. Virtual murder mystery
10. Craft afternoon/evening
11. Coffee morning
12. Online language lessons
13. Floristry class
14. Virtual book club
15. Quiz night
16. Inspirational speaker evenings
17. Yoga/fitness class
18. Wine tasting
19. Soft-skills training e.g. productivity
20. Virtual escape room

Raise money through competition entries

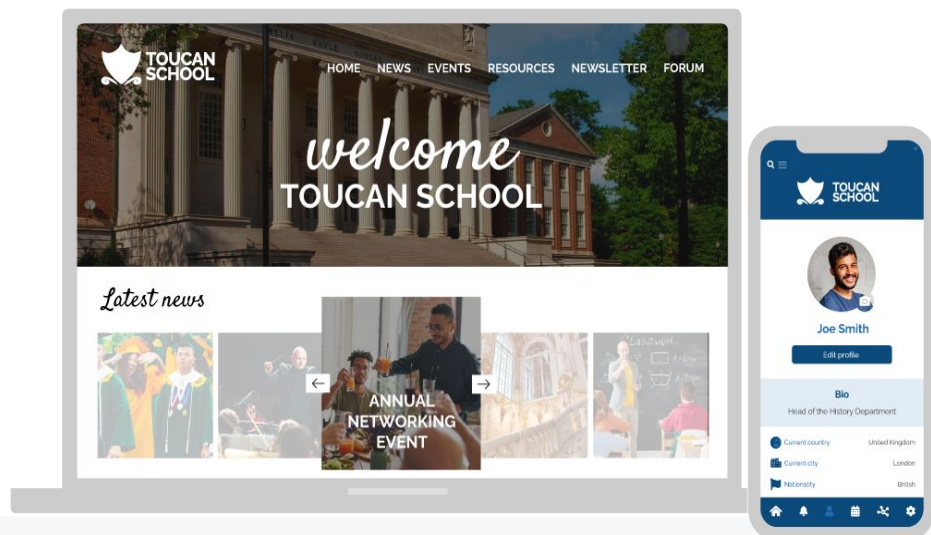
21. Virtual bake off/ cook off
22. Raffle / tombola
23. Writing competition
24. Talent contest
25. Come dine with me



About ToucanTech



ToucanTech is a **community management software** used by education organizations, nonprofits, and schools for community engagement, comms, and content. Combining a flexible **website** and powerful **database/ CRM**, it's an easy, all-in-one system.



Database

Import, filter, update and merge record, create custom fields, forms and admin permissions



Community

Connect your members on a branded network with privacy controls and mobile app



CRM

Track activity, measure engagement, capture consents, create postal labels, sync emails



Groups

Set-up group pages where admins can manage their own members, discussions, events



Email

Design and schedule newsletters, view stats, remove bounced emails, manage unsubscribes



Fundraising

Process donations and tax relief, set up funds, reconcile payments, run reports, steward donors



Resources

Upload photos, documents, magazines - tag, categorise, share and track downloads



Careers/mentoring

Run a mentoring system, post jobs, publish careers guides, promote business networking



News

Publish articles, videos, and other content - track views, tag people, share on social media



Events

Manage your events (online or in-person), invites, reminders, seating plans and ticketing

“

I wouldn't be able to do my job without ToucanTech - I use the system to send newsletters, track all activities with alumni, capture data through forms, publish news, photos and competitions. I've seen the software evolve over time and love that ToucanTech listen to feedback and provide fantastic webinars, support and ideas sharing amongst their customers. It's a fantastic communications and database tool.”

Michelle Cruickshank

Alumni Relations Officer,
Institute of Development
Studies



Visit toucantech.com or email
hello@toucantech.com to book a product demo

